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Inventory
for
Manuscript Collection
MS-477

Autobiographical Narrative of Captain W. Reed Farnsworth of Granville Ferry, Nova Scotia
Undated, circa 1900

by
Nathan R. Lipfert

March 2018

Two Folders
Accession # 2006.087.01

A PART OF THE CAPTAIN W. J. LEWIS PARKER BEQUEST

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Abstract

Farnsworth, William Reed, *Captain*

Autobiographical Narrative, not dated, circa 1900

Two folders

Shipmaster from Granville, NVS, later a real estate developer in southern California.

Typescript memoir ranging from his Nova Scotia birth in 1838 through his many seafaring experiences in Canadian vessels to his attempts to develop mines in southern California about 1900. Original and one carbon copy.

Bequeathed by Capt. W. J. Lewis Parker in 2006.

MS-477; Accession # 2006.087.01

Finding aid in repository; folder level control.

Added entries—people

Farnsworth, Hattie
Farnsworth, Howard
Farnsworth, Minnie
Farnsworth, Prudence
Farnsworth, Ruth
Farnsworth, William Reed, *Captain*
Troop, Alfonso, *Captain*
Troop, Howard D.
Troop, J. V., Sr.

Added entries—corporate bodies (including vessels)

Eliza A. Kenney (Ship)
Empress of India (Ship)
J. V. Troop (Ship)
J. V. Troop & Son
James W. Elwell & Co. (New York, N.Y.)
Morocco (Bark)
Water Lily (Brig)

Added entries—places

Anyer Kidul (inhabited place)
Annapolis Royal (N.S.)
Callao (Peru : Province)
Canada
Glasgow (Scotland)
Granville (N.S.)
Liverpool (England)
Cobh (Ireland)
Río de la Plata (Argentina and Uruguay)
Saint John (N.B.)
San Diego (Calif.)
Yokohama-shi (Japan)

Added entries—key terms

Autobiographies
Case oil trade

Coastwise shipping
Kerosene industry
Mineral industries
Mines and mineral resources
Petroleum industry and trade
Rites and ceremonies—Line crossing
West Indies trade

Acquisition

These copies of this narrative were bequeathed to Maine Maritime Museum from the estate of Capt. W. J. Lewis Parker in November and December 2006.

Provenance

Capt. Parker was an extremely knowledgeable collector and an expert on North American schooners. He picked up many parts of his collection of maritime papers by purchase from dealers, auctions, or estate sales, and by gifts from relatives of maritime figures. It is not known where he obtained Captain Farnsworth's *Autobiographical Narrative*. Captain Parker and his father Rupert were from the same area of Nova Scotia as Captain Farnsworth, and so they may have picked it up there. These papers were found in Captain Parker's study with other similar items, and were part of his maritime library which he bequeathed to Maine Maritime Museum.

Restrictions

There are no restrictions on the use of these materials for study or research. Researchers should seek permission to obtain copies, and for publication of any sort.

Physical Condition

These letters have the usual minor tears and dirt of early 20th-century documents. Overall, the Farnsworth narrative is in very good condition.

Biographical/Historical Notes

William Reed Farnsworth appears to have preferred W. Reed Farnsworth, although at one point in his narrative someone calls him "Will" and he is listed in the *Record of American & Foreign Shipping* as Wm. Farnsworth. He was born 21 October 1838 at Granville, Nova Scotia to Solomon and Anna B. (Cummings) Farnsworth. He was the second of 13 children of his father (some by a second wife). His father was a farmer.

He first went to sea aboard small Nova Scotian coasting schooners in August 1853, rising to command (according to his narrative) three years later, at the age of eighteen. At this time, a formal captain's license was neither required nor expected for commanding these little coasters, even though the schooners were trading to the United States and sometimes the West Indies. Farnsworth later studied navigation ashore, and went as mate or even boatswain aboard larger sailing vessels and steamers to obtain wider ocean-going experience. He obtained a Board of Trade certificate of competency as master 16 September 1868 at Dublin, although he does not mention this detail in the narrative (ancestry.com). He went on to command larger seagoing vessels, including full-rigged ships and new vessels built for his command.

In 1864 he married Prudence Hardy, another detail not mentioned in the narrative. She was another Nova Scotian, born in 1840. They had four children: Ruth in 1865, Hattie about 1869, Minnie in 1871, and Howard in 1873. None of the children followed the sea or married a mariner. Ruth never married and lived with her parents until their deaths. Hattie died about 1884.

Captain Farnsworth commanded and owned shares in many Nova Scotian vessels and engaged in world-wide shipping and freight-carrying, while still living in Nova Scotia. He left the sea in 1887, moving to San Diego and bringing his family there. He plunged into commercial activity there, trying his hand at real estate, farming, gold mining and other mineral mining. For a number of years he was a port warden in San Diego, and a surveyor there for French Lloyds (Bureau Veritas). Wife Prudence died 18 January 1920; the captain died in San Diego 14 May that same year.

The 1920 census shows him living at 4390 Monte Virlow Avenue in San Diego, and Prudence and Ruth living at 3093 Myrtle Avenue. Both forms were filled out in early January, before either of their deaths that year. No reason for a separation, if there was one, is known.

The family story is recorded in a Farnsworth genealogy compiled in 1967 by Percy Farnsworth: "He retired from the sea a wealthy man. Moving to California, he lost his money in gold mining investments and died a poor man in 1920." [ancestry.com] Captain Farnsworth's narrative indicates that he never had a great deal of money. A photograph of Capt. Farnsworth in middle age can be seen in some of the ancestry.com entries for him.

Scope and Content Notes

The collection consists entirely of an original typescript and a carbon copy, both bound with brass fasteners between a title page on blue paper and a plain blue paper back. Pages are numbered up to 52, but there are 54 leaves; there is a page 17, a page 17a and a page 17b.

There are one or two editorial remarks in the typescript, making it seem as if this is a transcript from Captain Farnsworth's original manuscript. The carbon copy (folder 1) has many editorial annotations in blue ink, probably by a ballpoint pen. It could be Captain Parker's handwriting. The original typescript (folder 2) has a few editorial marks, done in black ink by a fountain pen. The script ends in the middle of a sentence, at the beginning of a paragraph, in the

middle of a story about selling or developing a $3.5 million deposit of phosphate acid rock. We assume it did not end well.

The narrative is obviously intended to document his business career only. He describes telling his father that he wanted to go to sea rather than stay to work the farm, but he does not describe parting with any members of the family. His mother had died when he was only five of six, and he does not mention his step mother at all, and does not mention his father again. He does not mention his courtship or marriage, or the births of his children. His wife and children are briefly mentioned in the narrative, when they happen to be aboard a sinking vessel or very sick.

Autobiographical Narrative of Captain W. Reed Farnsworth begins with the story of the author deciding to go to sea, telling his father he did not want any part of the farm, and his father helping him to set himself up as a mariner. He signed on the little schooner *Fasion* (*Fashion*?) as cook at $6 per month in August 1853. For the next few years he worked aboard a succession of small schooners from Nova Scotia, trading around the maritime provinces, but primarily to Boston, Massachusetts. By 1856, according to his narrative, he was commanding some of these schooners.

By 1859 or 1860, desirous of advancing his training and experience, he began joining the crews of square-riggers and venturing further afield. He rose to become mate of sea-going vessels, and even went boatswain in some steamers (not having a certificate to go as mate). About 1866, he became the master of the brig *Water Lily.* In 1869 or 1870 he assumed command of the brand new bark (barque) *Morocco*, built in St. John. In 1876 he took another new vessel, the ship *Empress of India*, also St. John-built, and in 1878 an older ship, the *Eliza A. Kenney.* In 1879 he commanded yet another new vessel, the ship *J. V. Troop,* which he stayed with until he left the sea in 1887.

By the age of 40 he expressed the desire to retire from the sea, and says in his narrative that he was in poor health but could not afford to retire. He did stay home for short periods, but is always persuaded to return to command. Until 1887, that is, when he swallows the anchor for good.

The narrative documents many different trades – coastwise trade to Boston and other places, West Indies trade, trade to Europe including cotton, lumber, deals, and oil cargoes and immigrants, guano trade from Peru, Chilean nitre (nitrate?), and case oil (kerosene) to Japan, among others.

Captain Farnsworth was often a shareholder in the vessels he commanded, and most of his career he was employed by J. V. Troop & Son of St. John, New Brunswick. The Troops used as their New York agent a Mainer named James W. Elwell. Farnsworth mentions the James W. Elwell & Co. office a number of times, and this is about the only Maine connection in the narrative, although he did mention passing Monhegan Island and sheltering near “Booth Bay” in one passage.

There is good description here of the many trades, sailing vessel operation, the difficulties of freighting and trading, the problems of crew management, as well as general seafaring information, such as the description of a line-crossing ceremony. The reader of the narrative will be amazed at the challenges Captain Farnsworth faced and the way he was always right, outwitted all opponents, and knew exactly what to do in every situation, when all around him were losing hope. Later in the narrative, in the 1870s and 1880s, he was overcome by some of the difficulties, in particular the decline in freights for sailing vessels.

In 1887 he left the sea (page 47), tempted by the opportunities of a real estate boom in San Diego. He reported not doing well with that, and tried taking up farming before diving into the mining business. He had briefly been caught up in the excitement of a gold discovery in 1861 in Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia, so it was no surprise to read that he was also involved in attempts to open gold mines near San Diego after discoveries there in the 1880s. There always seemed to be more investment needed before his mines could pay. The narrative ends with him in the middle of trying to cash in on a large deposit of "phosphate acid rock."

Whoever made the editorial notations on this manuscript made a few correction of grammar, but seemed mostly interested in checking the sequence of events, and checked voyages against the "M.R.," probably the New York Maritime Register, of which Captain Lew Parker was a big fan. It is possible that this unknown editor was Captain Parker himself. Farnsworth appears to be remembering every detail of every voyage, although once or twice he admits to being unsure of the sequence of events, and the editor evidently believed that Farnsworth did get confused in a few places.

Box and Folder List

Box	Folder	
1	1	Autobiographical Narrative of Captain W. Reed Farnsworth (copy)
	2	Autobiographical Narrative of Captain W. Reed Farnsworth (original)